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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2018]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Please recycle

Religious persecution of a new religious movement in China

1. The Church of Almighty God (CAG) is the largest Chinese new religious movement. Governmental sources attribute to it four million members.1 It was founded in China in 1991, and its core belief is that Jesus Christ has returned to earth as Almighty God, incarnated as a Chinese woman currently living in the United States of America who teaches the fullness of truth.
2. Since 1995, the CAG has been in the list of banned groups (*xie jiao*, wrongly translated as "evil cults," but in fact meaning "heterodox teachings").2 Under article 300 of Chinese Criminal Code, being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime punished with a jail penalty of three to seven years "or more."3 It is not necessary to be a leader of the CAG to be arrested. Being an ordinary member, and even being found in possession of CAG literature, is enough to be arrested, detained, and sentenced to heavy jail terms.
3. The CAG claims that more than 300,000 Church members have been arrested.4 Figures are impossible to confirm, but scholars point out the frequent news of arrests involving hundreds of CAG members in several Chinese provinces. NGOs have appealed to the United Nations documenting several instances of torture or even death in custody.5 CAG appears to suffer now more severe persecution than Falun Gong in China.
4. The Chinese authorities have launched massive campaigns of fake news to discredit the CAG and justify the persecution. The government successfully persuaded even respected Western media that in 2014 CAG members murdered a woman in a McDonald's in Zhaoyuan. However, studies of the original trial documents by senior Western scholars led to the conclusion that the murder had been perpetrated by members of a different religious movement, which had a similar name but was not related to the CAG.6 In other cases of crimes ascribed to the CAG, scholars have reached the same conclusions.7
5. From May, 2018, the Chinese authorities conducted nationwide arrests against the CAG again, arresting thousands of CAG members in several provinces.8 For example in the span between June 26 and 28, and in what they have called "Operation Thunder" launched in the province of Liaoning, nearly 300 people were arrested in Dalian and Panjin, 47 in Dandong, 39 in Chaoyang, 36 in Benxi, 23 in Jinzhou, 19 in Shenyang, 14 in Fuxin, nine in Fushun, eight in Huludao, five in Yingkou, two in Tieling, and one in Anshan. Their homes were searched, and large amounts of religious books on CAG and personal belongings were taken away by the police. This special operation was classified as top secret. To prevent any leaks prior to the arrests, the government kept information on the targets from police officers and purposefully dispatched them to other areas during the operation. Officers were required to sign a confidentiality agreement. The authorities released the list of names for arrest only in the final ten minutes before the operation commenced on June 26. Officers also received a group notice through WeChat, a Chinese social media platform, strictly requiring them to work day and night to complete the arrests.9 And the numbers of reports on CAG members arrested we receive are increasing every day. We have also received disturbing reports of police brutalities, home searches carried out without warrants, and torture in connection with "Operation Thunder."

1 See e.g. https://www.adhrrf.org/china-ma-xingrui-20140709.html.

2 See Edward Irons, "The List: The Evolution of China's List of Illegal and Evil Cults," *The Journal of CESNUR* 2(2018). 33-57. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2018.2.1.3.

3 http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgvienna/eng/dbtyw/jdwt/crimelaw/t209043.htm.

4 http://www.cesnur.org/2017/almighty_china_report.pdfx.

5 See e.g. CAP-LC (Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience) and others, "Universal Periodic Review, China. Religious Freedom and Persecution in China: The Case of The Church of Almighty God." Submission to the United Nations' Human Rights Council, copy available upon request.

6 See Massimo Introvigne, "'Cruel Killing, Brutal Killing, Kill the Beast': Investigating the 2014 McDonald's 'Cult Murder' in Zhaoyuan," *The Journal of CESNUR* 1(2017):61-73, DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2017.1.1.6; and Massimo Introvigne and David Bromley, "The Lü Yingchun/Zhang Fan Group," *World Religions and Spirituality Project* (Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia), October 16, 2017,https://wrldrels.org/2017/10/16/lu-yingchun-zhang-fan-group/.

7 See Holly Folk, "'Cult Crimes' and Fake News: Eye-Gouging in Shanxi," *The Journal of CESNUR* 1(2017):96–109. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2017.1.2.5.

8 See e.g. https://bitterwinter.org/700-cag-members-arrested/; https://bitterwinter.org/half-a-thousand-members-of-the-church-of-almighty-god-arrested/.

9 https://bitterwinter.org/half-a-thousand-members-of-the-church-of-almighty-god-arrested/.

6. NGOs have also documented the highly suspicious deaths while in custody of more than 30 CAG leaders and members,10 which leads us to conclude that extra-judicial killing of CAG devotees is a frequent practice in China.
7. We urge the government of China to stop its persecution of the CAG, investigate charges of torture and extra-judicial killings and held those responsible accountable, and cease its international campaign of fake news against CAG. We also urge all member states of the UN where CAG members fleeing China seek asylum, to generously welcome and protect these refugees, considering that, should they be sent back to China, they would face arrest and detention, or worse.

10 Human Rights Without Frontiers, *Tortured to Death: The Persecution of The Church of Almighty God in China*, Brussels: Human Rights Without Frontiers.